The Progressive Review

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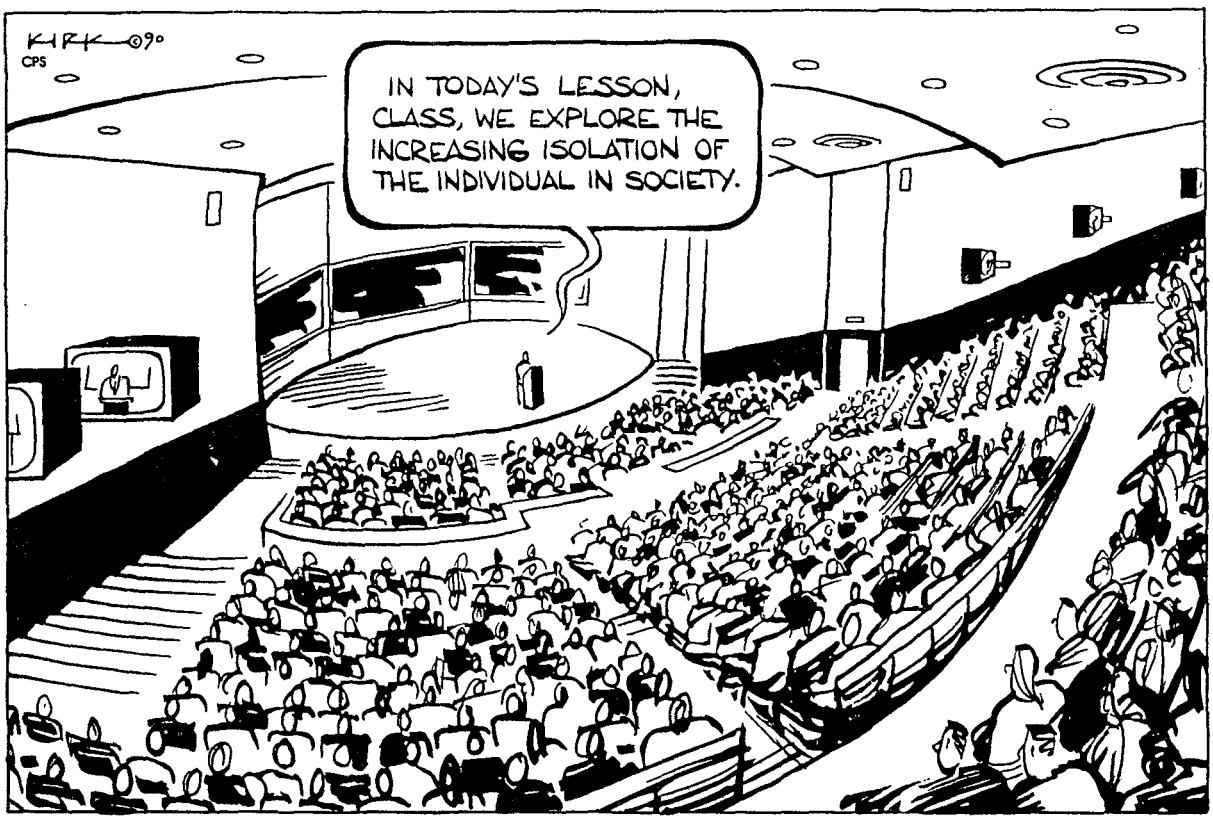

Saving urban America from itself

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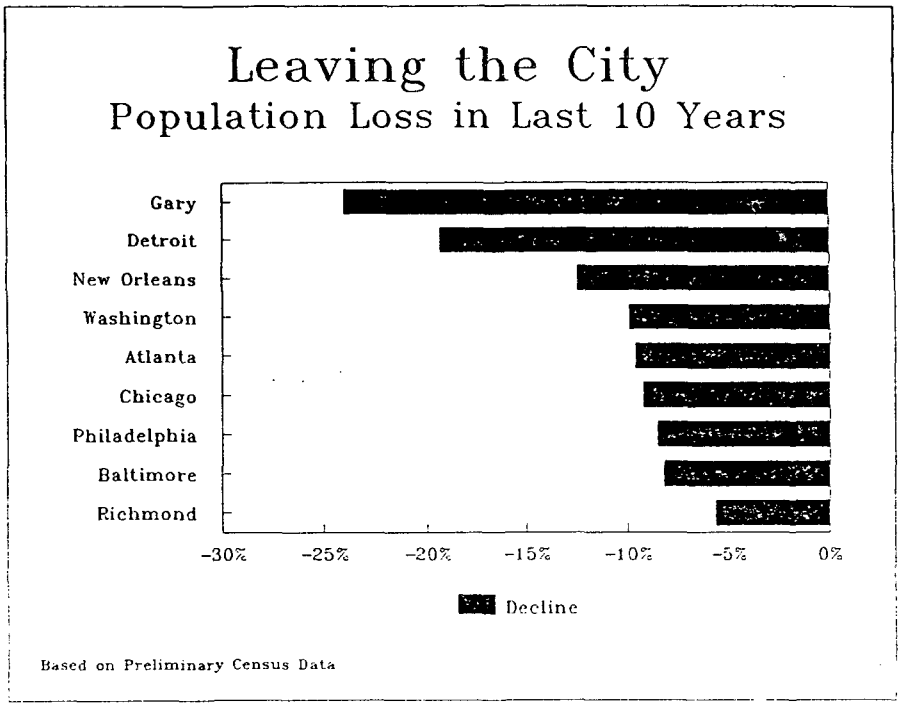

Alienation as we find it in modern society is almost total... Man has created a world of man-made things as it never existed before. He has constructed a complicated social machine to administer the technical machine he built. the more powerful and gigantic the forces are which he unleashes, the more powerless he feels himself as a human being. He is owned by his own creation, and has lost ownership of himself -- Erich Fromm

American cities, even if the Census Bureau has undercounted them, are clearly out of favor with a growing number of people. According to preliminary 1990 figures, cities like Detroit, New Orleans, Washington, Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia and Baltimore have lost more than 5% of their population in the past ten years. This, in many cases, is a trend that has been underway for two decades. The desertion occurred despite enormously expensive urban development programs and enormously expansive urban rhetoric. For years, America's mayors, local corporate leaders, city dailies and others have doggedly pursued the course of giving the American city more of the same treatment that got it into trouble in the first place. The returns are now in.

That the implications are extraordinarily powerful will become clear enough after the next congressional redistricting. Urban, black, and poor America, already grossly underrepresented in the Senate, is about to take a major hit in the House as well. A recent *Washington Post* story notes that not only did populations losses occur in half of the 20 largest cities, there were declines in ten of the eleven cities with large black populations. Black congressmembers will find their districts extending into white suburbia, and representatives like John Conyers and William Gray will have to gain at least 100,000 new constituents in the redistricting. In 19 out of the 24 black seats in the House, new territory will have to be added to the incumbent's district. Thus it is probable that blacks, already shortchanged in the House, will find their numbers cut still further. And the poor will have fewer national voices.

How it got that way

That cities have problems is nothing new. One of the functions of cities has always been the efficient exploitation of labor, producing a continual struggle between those doing the exploitation and those enduring it. And it is also true, as a 19th century book put it, that "Great cities must ever be centres of light and darkness; the repositories of piety and wickedness; the home of the best and the worst..." Architectural critic Charles Lockwood quotes the mayor of New York City declaring in 1839: "This city is infested by gangs of hardened wretches" who "patrol the streets making night hideous and insulting all who are not strong enough to defend themselves."

The question has always been one of countervailing virtues and faults, but what is happening now suggests a new stage in American urban history: the growing perception that big cities are not worth the candle.

The commercial advantage of the city has been eroded by the suburbanization of business, the communications advantage eroded by technology and the cultural advantage by television, film and tape.

The changes in the city have been a long time coming. The streetcar and then the automobile destroyed the compact city in which people lived and worked within walking distance. In its place came suburbanization with the man leaving the neighborhood for employment and the wife staying home, creating finally what one writer described as the modern centaur, half woman, half stationwagon.

These changes also reflected low energy costs and what we now know was a dismal lack of understanding of environmental impact. Yet despite vast changes in sex

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roles and in our ecological knowledge, city planning acts as though the last three decades never occurred.

Planners continue to seek what Richard Sennett has called "the purified community." He gives the example of Baron Haussmann's design for Paris in the 1860's as an rstly attempt to plan physical space for predetermined social use. His broad avenues "often served to put the purely social problems of poverty and petit-bourgeois deprivation out of mind by putting them out of sight behind the beautiful grand boulevards.

"Haussmann bequeathed the notion to us that it is somehow better, and certainly easier, to change the physical landscape in order to alter the social patterns of the metropolis."

Describing the psychology of urban planners, Sennett says in *The Uses of Disorder*: "Their impulse has been to give way to that tendency, developed in adolescence, of men to control unknown threats by eliminating the possibility for experiencing surprise."

Even the best minds have felt the impulse. In one of the few low moments of his judicial career, William O. Douglas wrote a Supreme Court decision in 1954 upholding the country's first massive urban renewal project, which included the brutal clearing of 551 acres of existing community. Said Douglas: "The experts concluded that if the community were to be healthy, if it were not to revert again to a blighted or slum area, as though possessed by a congenital disease, the area must be planned as a whole."

To be sure, city planning periodically has recognized that something was wrong, but almost inevitably the response has tended to be cosmetic rather than organic.

Pedestrian malls are a nice example of the vanity of planners' dreams. Designed as the downtown alternative to suburban shopping centers, the malls looked right, but worked far less successfully. Says urban development consultant Lawrence O. Houstoun Jr, "The pedestrian malls had some initial success because they were the first thing that looked good downtown, but they didn't deal with the basic problem. The problem wasn't that people wanted to walk in the street; the problem was that downtown was inconvenient or became inconvenient." Houstoun notes that studies have shown that people will walk about nine minutes, or three blocks, at lunchtime. Not even an attractive pedestrian mall will entice them further. So now some cities are "restreeting," ripping up the malls, including Kalamazoo, which once called itself "Mall City."

There is almost a manic quality to the efforts of city planners and politicians to save their turf. Yet for all the motion there is little change. Outmoded zoning principles remain firmly in place. The relative power of the corporation in the city, compared to other interests such as those of neighborhoods or minorities, has been little affected even by the rise of black urban political power. Black mayors have been as willing, if not more so, to deal with the white power brokers. There is an enormous lag between social development and urban development; in no major American city today have the vast social changes of our society made a strong impact on the way the city works as an organism. Further, as bioregionalist Peter Berg points out, urban areas have vastly overreached their local bases: "Los Angeles extracts water from Northern California, coal from Colorado and liquified gas from Indonesia." And cities

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Editor: Sam Smith
The Progressive Review
1739 Connecticut Ave NW
Washington DC 20009
202-232-5544
Fax Nbr: 202-234-6222
Compuserve ID# 72067,1525
Peacenet Handle: ssmith

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continue to make their choices in the traditional manner, well described as "decide, announce, defend."

Even in progressive political circles, relatively little thought is given to changing the nature of the city itself. Progressive urban politics is still largely the politics of money, of subsidizing survival, and of mitigating damage. But such politics implicitly accepts much of the status quo in cities that have become little more than mega-ghettos in a largely urban country.

Edward Woodward once speculated that eventually there would be no one living in our cities except corporations. It's not even clear that they will want to remain given current trends. Fortunately, however, there is a growing movement of thinkers and activists who are putting their minds to alternatives and, as they do so, they are creating a new image of the city and how it might work, an image that is not a gossamer ideal, but a highly pragmatic vision of the sort we will either choose to follow or face an urban future in which we will watch old videos of *Max Headroom* and wonder why we didn't do something while there was still time.

What follows are some of these ideas. They come from an variety of places and perspectives. Some I have resurrected from my own writing as far back as 20 years ago, some from a remarkable international conference on the EcoCity held last spring,[1] some from the little corners where one finds the most important knowledge. They are not, of course, comprehensive, but they may give the reader a sense of both the help and the hope that could be on the way if we keep shooting off flares in the urban night.

Starting Over

"I think the thing we're talking about is no more or less hard to understand than the simple desire to have a home. a home and a sense of home that can only grow out of a sense of place. Cities aren't places anymore. They're scenes, projected on screens, then bulldozed away, neighborhood by neighborhood, like cancelled TV shows."
-- Gurney Norman, *Whole Earth Catalog*

For changes to occur there must first be a political mechanism, a pump to move the water of our thoughts and dreams from the past to the future. Today, one of the primary characteristics of our political system is the isolation of the citizen from the politician. This wasn't intended by the country's founders. In the first Congress, the average representative had only 37,000 constituents, far fewer than many current city councilmembers, who can represent as many as 200,000 people.

The example of Columbus, Ohio, is instructive. In 1816 there was one city councilmember for every hundred residents. By 1840 there was one for every thousand residents. By 1872 the figure had dwindled from one to every five thousand. By 1974, there was one councilmember for every 55,000 people.

Among the effects of this phenomenon are:

- Citizens lack access to politicians
- Politicians, responsible for oversized political units, rely heavily on bureaucrats who are unresponsive to the citizen.
- The expense and difficulty of making changes in the political structure is magnified. From civic committees to militant demonstrations, from community organizing to riots, citizens in recent years have experimented with a variety of methods to achieve the political change they could not achieve within the political system. They have had minimal success.
- Both the politician and the bureaucrat become scornful of the democratic process as they become less dependent upon it. The citizens become more scornful of the democratic process as it apparently fails them.
- The citizens' contact with politicians increasingly comes through the images of the media rather than through direct or even second-hand contact.

Back to the neighborhood

Neighborhood government offers an antidote to the chronic gap between government and governed. There is, after all, little reason to cling to the notion that the solution to our problems is to spend more money on the form of government that has increasingly shown its incompetence. To say that because the crime rate is rising sharply we should therefore double the size of the police force that has been unable to cope with it, to reward with more concentrated power a city government that has spent decades on absurd, disruptive and cruel planning, to continue to vest the power of educating our children in an administrative system that appears to lag as far behind the human intelligence norm as the children its miseducates do in reading and math -- surely this can have little logical justification. Or has the air pollution that rasps our lungs with the residue of years of faith in the principle of "make no small plans" so addled our brains that we are incapable of anything other than more of the same?

Neighborhood government is another way. It is not some utopian scheme but a pragmatic approach. It is, in fact, contemporary large city governance that is utopian in that there is no empirical evidence that it works. It is under this form of government that we generally find the worst crime, the worst education, the worst health, the worst pollution, and the highest unemployment.

Neighborhood government is pragmatic economically. We know, for example, that the per-capita costs of government begin to soar in jurisdictions larger than about 200,000 residents. There are several explanations for this. For one thing, a big city government is, by its very size, a city in itself, one which must be served first before the needs of the larger city outside of city hall. For example, the city government of Washington, DC, is larger than the entire population of Annapolis, Md; Dover, Del; Augusta, Ga.; Rockville, Md; Wilkes-Barre, Pa; or Wheeling, WVA.

For another thing, the larger the jurisdiction the greater the tendency to deal with problems through the application of money and bureaucracy. Imagination narrows into a budget item; the specific offspring of the budget item becomes far less important than the fact that it costs X dollars.

Small government works differently. It tends to pay more attention to detail and substance. I recall attending a PTA meeting at which the chaos produced by major teacher reassignments was discussed. It did not take long before someone pointed out that while we must deal with citywide issue, we must also continue to teach the children no matter what happened. A committee was formed to seek volunteers to help fill in the gaps caused by the transfers. Nobody volunteers to help the city's school superintendent. Big government doesn't work that way.

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Beginning at the top

The cure for urban ills will clearly not all be found in cities themselves, nor is it -- as many liberals argue -- primarily a function of how much money the federal government throws at them. The truth is that the structure of the federal government is anti-urban, and by corollary anti-poor and anti-minority. For example, the Congress is so segregated that if it were a school system it would be under court-ordered bussing. How do we start to change this? One solution would be to create additional states, carved out of large metropolitan areas. The efforts of Washington, DC, -- and many in Puerto Rico -- for statehood could set a precedent. There is nothing particularly radical in this. Ask the folks in West Virginia, Maine or other states formed out of existing states. Further, the country's founders made statehood relatively easy to achieve, giving us an opportunity periodically to adjust the federal compact.

Dealing with the House of Representatives would be more difficult, although increasing its size would help it to become more representative, as would a constitutional change to some form of proportional representation. These ideas are not high on anyone's list right now, but perhaps after the damage done to urban and minority interests in forthcoming redistricting, there will be some new thought given to the matter. -- S. S.

Neighborhood government is also pragmatic politically. Much political dissatisfaction comes from the inability of residents to make their concerns felt at city hall. Problems are specific; big city government by its nature is general. If you don't fit the average or the generalized model you get left behind.

Back in the early 70s, Senator Mark Hatfield made the remarkable proposal that citizens be allowed to funnel a major portion of their tax dollars to neighborhood organizations. In defense of this profoundly radical idea, he cited some figures that dramatically show how some of the nation's social problems could be broken into smaller and more manageable parts:

If, for example, every church and synagogue were to take over the responsibility of caring for ten people over the age of 65 who are presently living below the poverty level, there would be no present welfare programs needed for the aged. If each church or synagogue took over the responsibility of 18 families who are eligible for welfare todays, there would not be any need for federal or state welfare programs to families. If each church and synagogue cared for less than one child each, the present day care programs supported by federal and state funds would be totally unnecessary.

One way to quickly and dramatically shift the power in a city away from city hall and to the neighborhoods is to create neighborhood commissions along the model used in Washington and then give these commissions much more power, including discretionary authority over, say, their proportionate share of 1% of the city spending. In Washington, DC, that would work out to about $1 million for a community of 25,000. Each community could decide for itself how the million should be spent: how much for police, libraries, housing, education and so forth. There would be mistakes but you can almost guarantee that there would be extraordinarily imaginative successes as well. And the mere process would make everyone think harder about how we spend money in the city.

Ending economic bussing

The city is changing whether we do anything about it or not. For example, Walter Truett Anderson, who writes regularly on future trends, thinks the skyscraper may be on its way out, a victim of changing workstyles, new communications technology, worsening urban congestion, and general inefficiency. Anderson quotes British management consultant Bruce Lloyd: "What are all these buildings for? The ego trips of top management." Lloyd points out that office buildings are not subjected to the same kind of cost-consciousness applied to other assets. Lloyd estimates, says Anderson, "that the average office is in use about 228 days a year, or 63%. An eight-hour workday out of each 24 reduces actual utilization to 76 days, or 21% of the year. But then most people take an average of two hours out of a day for arriving late, leaving early. lunch, illness -- and operating time is down to 57 days, or 16%. Out of that, according to his research, about one-third of the time is spent on purely social activity (either personal or office related), another third on activity devoted to running the building and the office organization itself and the remaining one-third on work. 'This,' he says, 'reduces the use of that precious office-block capital asset down to 19 continuous days in a year, just a bit more than five percent of the total time available.' He suspects that if you included other factors that reduce actual office utilization -- time workers spend 'on the road,' time they spend merely goofing off -- the real figure might come down to two or three percent. 'Not many factories or power stations,' he concluded, 'are allowed to waste assets on such a prolific scale."

Other factors that are contributing to office obsolescence include working at home, the impact of the computer and fax machines and the development of ways to keep businesses working around the clock. For example, Anderson notes that in India young technicians "spend their working day hooked up via satellite to the AT&T master computer in North Carolina, 'debugging' the programs that run America's telephone system. Because of the time difference, they are coming to work just when the Americans who do the same thing in North Carolina are quitting, so the work goes on steadily round-the-clock."

The high-rise office building is merely the symbol of a profound misreading of urban economic needs, based on a couple of ill-founded theories:

o Bigger is better

o Office buildings are the best and quickest routes to a better tax base.

As Lloyd's analysis of the high-rise indicates, offices are inefficient physical assets, yet they have been the sine qua non of every self-respecting mayor of the past few decades. As a result it is not surprising to find, for example, that while 55% of Washington's downtown was in office space in 1980, by 1989 the figure was was 62%. Meanwhile, residential units had dropped from 7%

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of the total to 4%, retail from 22% to 13% and even the much ballyhooed cultural facilities, occupying less than 2% of downtown in 1980, lost relative ground as well.

Of course the homogenization of downtowns is not the only distortion that has occurred in the push for office construction. In many cities, communities outside of downtown have suffered in inverse proportion. Again, as an example of scale, in 1989 Washington bragged of $224 million in new office building construction starts for the year, but in listing "neighborhood revitalization projects" it could only come up with $38 million of them, about half of which were also for offices.

If these new office jobs went to residents of the city producing them, the problem would be less serious. But in Washington, which is probably not atypical, this has not been the case. Over the past decade 71,000 well-trumpeted private jobs have been created in the city, but the number of DC residents employed has actually dropped by 1000. Washington, like many of its urban peers, has running an economic bussing program for suburbanites. If just a quarter of these new jobs had gone to DC residents, the city could have virtually wiped out its unemployment problem. Instead, the city has staked its future on essentially non-taxpaying commuters who use city services such as transport and public safety, while their reimbursement may amount to little more than the sales tax on a daily yogurt and salad. Small wonder Washington is on the list of cities with serious financial problems.

American cities badly need a better economic mix -- more retail and light industrial rather than office space; and more small business rather than big business. Big business is not an efficient job producer. Over the past five years, for example, DC's top ten private employers have added a grand total of 771 new jobs, or about 2% of all new jobs created during the period. Small business, on the other hand, is more labor intensive and less prone to achieve efficiency through automation.

Some of the most efficient job producers in a city are not only ignored, they are discouraged. For example, if all of Washington's taxi drivers or street vendors worked for a single company, it would be the largest firm in the city. You'd never guess it from public policy, which is far more concerned with the regulation of these activities than with the encouragement of them. They are treated more as a nuisance than an essential part of the economic life of the city. Thus, two of the few industries anyone in the city can enter without the vagaries of "personnel procedures" and without a college education are actively discouraged.

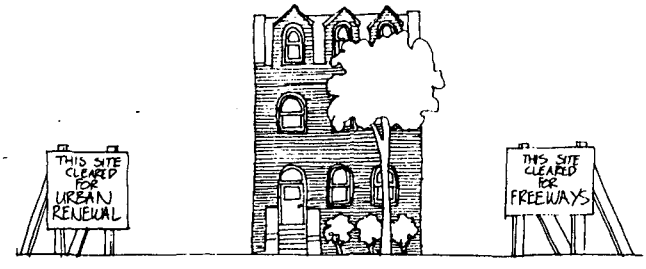
Bringing justice home

The decline of the older city is intimately related to the problem of crime. One need not get into a chicken-and-egg argument to recognize that the failures of urban policy contribute to crime and crime contributes to the failure of cities. The question is: how to be interrupt this destructive cycle? The conventional answers -- more police and more prisons -- not only haven't worked they are beginning to bankrupt a number of cities. As with the economy and the environment, we have to engage in lateral rather than incremental thinking if we are to come up with solutions that will really make a difference.

There are a number of things that could be done, but none are more important than restoring the community to the focus of our attempts to obtain social order. Most law and order stems from personal and community values or peer pressure of one sort or another. Yet our prescription for law and order in the city tends to ignore the role of the community, using as its surrogate vastly over-extended police departments and courts.

There is no substitute for organic social order, as even totalitarian countries have discovered. To create this organic system of justice, we must return to the community and build our justice system out from it.

For two decades this journal has argued for community courts and neighborhood constables as a way of re-creating community law and order. Back in the 60s I took part in a debate with DC public safety commissioner Patrick Murphy and a representative of the International Chiefs of Police, making the argument that the centralization of the local police department and deployment of officers to squad cars was moving in the wrong direction. The police reporter for the *Washington Post* turned to the person next to him and asked, "Who is that nut?"



THERE ARE SIX MAJOR ANIMAL SPECIES IN WASHINGTON: dogs, birds, cockroaches, termites, rats, and human beings. Of these only the last is endangered. Dogs run wild in packs in some parts of town; starlings and pigeons resist the most technologically advanced techniques of eradication; roaches and termites thrive despite extermination service contracts; and the rat has responded to the best efforts of the Department of Environmental Services by producing a mutant strain resistant to all known poisons. But the human is in trouble.

One reason is that the ecology of the urban human remains little understood. We now comprehend the hazards of blithely pouring DDT over crops, slashing through treelands, or fouling the air. But we still act as though we can, without penalty, wipe out neighborhoods, force mass migrations, rip out favorite meeting places for people, or tear down centers of communications, culture, and commerce that are as important to a community as a marsh is to a flyway.

There are a few organizations in Washington dedicated to human conservation. But they generally fall into two categories: the small and weak, and those large, slick groups whose advocacy has a hollow sound. Too often the latter bodies consist of cooks protesting the stew. There are too many vested interests within their confines. What starts out as an urban coalition turns into an urban cabal. A manufacturer of redwood homes would be unlikely to win a seat on the board of the Sierra Club. In Washington, it's different. The people who have appointed themselves to solve urban problems and the people causing the problems are too often the same.

-- S.S., 1974

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Now, more and more cities are moving towards this concept, calling it "community policing." Recently, even as mainstream a figure as Matthew Crosson, chief administrator of New York state courts, called for the creation of community courts in neighborhoods to handle minor crimes. The proposal will be in a legislative package to be presented in December.

It should be noted, however, that neither the current view of community policing nor Crosson's idea of community courts go far enough in bringing the community into the justice system. For the system to really work, both police and courts not only have to be *in* the community but *of* the community as well. The power as well as the structure has to be in the neighborhood.

Another critical justice issue, in the wake of what a British publication has called America's "decadent neopuritanism," is the extraordinary amount of money has been spent to exorcise cities of sins that have been characteristic of urban areas since the first city was built. These include prostitution, drugs, gambling, and pornography. A policy that treated such issues primarily as health and social problems, and of containment rather than eradication, would not only have immense economic benefits to cities currently groaning under the costs of the futile "war on drugs," but would free resources to deal with serious crime and with the social conditions that encourage personal excess of all kinds.

The curse of zoning

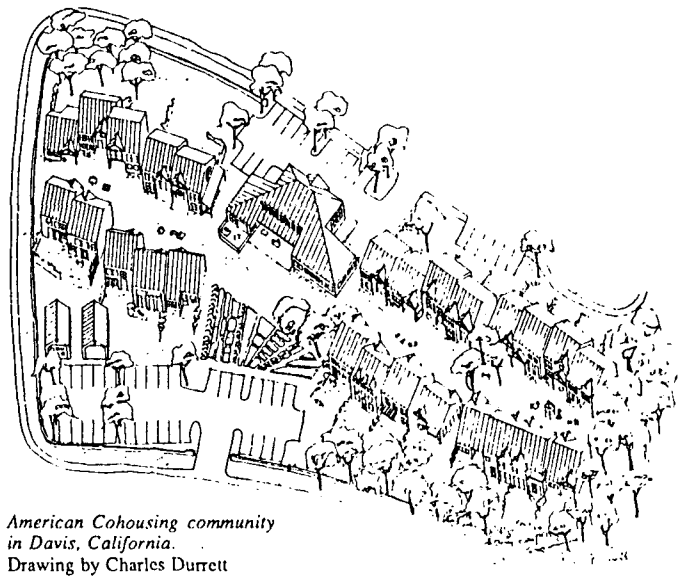
To bring significant change to the cities and suburbia of America, nothing is more important than a revolution in our concepts of zoning. Though introduced early in this century as a reform, zoning has often been manipulated to provide vast profits for a small number of developers, or to serve the cause of social exclusion. Current zoning laws generally are blithely indifferent to decades of accumulated ecological knowledge, to the changing status of women, to the need for new economic opportunity and to the ghettoization of the city. The bias against the mixed use neighborhood, home employment and technological experimentation and innovation -- and in favor of a socially and economically unsound emphasis on single-family residential living -- is one of the major obstacles to creating better urban living.[2]

New housing

Not everyone who leaves the city wants to. In many cases the cost and availability of housing provides the impetus. Among the factors that have raised the cost and lowered the availability has been gentrification. The gentrifiers not only upscale the housing stock, they require more space per-capita in which to do it than did former residents. For example, houses that previously housed boarders or large families now contain only one couple.

One of the simplest, cheapest and quickest to counteract this trend is to change zoning laws to permit auxiliary apartments in single-family zones. In cities like Washington many of these apartments exist illegally, supporting the thesis that one of the best place to look for new ideas is in the underground economy. If normally law-abiding people insist on doing something despite the law's prohibition, it's at least possible that the people known something the law doesn't.

The advantages of such apartments include



American Cohousing community in Davis, California.
Drawing by Charles Durrett

lowering the effective cost of housing for the homeowner, increasing the supply of housing, providing for a social and economic mix within neighborhoods, allowing voluntary individual care to replace some of the need for social services (e.g. the young apartment dweller helping the aged landlord upstairs), providing neighborhood-based economic opportuity and increasing the number of eyes on the street.

A more radical approach is cohousing. Cohousing involves individual homes clustered around a large common house with such facilities as a dining room, children's playroom, workshops and laundries. The houses typically have their own kitchen and are otherwise minimally self-sufficient but with the emphasis on communal facilities. Each cohousing plan is worked out with intense participation by future occupants. There is no single plan for these projects; they are designed for specific and changing needs and hospitable to spontaneity, thus avoiding what Chesterton called "the huge modern heresy of altering the human soul to fit its conditions, instead of altering human conditions to fit the human soul." The idea was first developed in Denmark in 1972 and there are now over 100 cohousing communities there and in the Netherlands. The cohousing approach has been used for condominiums, cooperatives and non-profit rental housing.

Adherents see a number of advantages to this approach, among them a balance of privacy and community, a safe and supportive environment for children, a practical and spontaneous lifestyle, and environmentally sensitive design. The idea also offers security, the potential for higher densities, and the resulting decline in need for transportation. The authors of *Cohousing* point out that "the scale of cohousing communities -- 15 to 35 dwellings -- makes them ideal for urban infill sites or conversions of existing buildings."

If cohousing is too avant garde for one's taste there are plenty of alternatives, among them is ceasing to build so many single family residential homes. The *New York Times* recently described a project being developed in Jersey City just across from lower Manhattan, where two or three unit houses are being built for under $290,000. In other words, three units of housing are being provided at an average cost of less than $100,000 each a short transit ride to downtown Manhattan. As one of the

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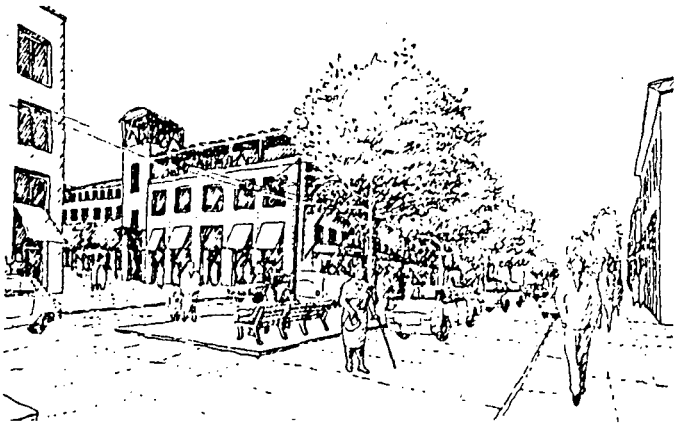

Light rail station, pedestrian pocket

developers noted, "The time is right to go back to the basics. The city was built on two- and three-family homes." Said a partner, "What we are providing here are all the amenities of suburban living in an urban setting." One of the clever aspects of the homes is that the third unit, set behind the garage, is of optional design, so it can be used either for rental, relatives, storage or additional living quarters.

Growing things

There is plenty that can be done with existing housing as well. Not only can it be made more energy efficient, but we can pay attention to such formerly seeming frills as roof-top gardens. Landscape architect Theodore Osmundson noted at the EcoCity conference that normal development and paving allow no water to be absorbed into the ground and the heat generated in the summer and escaping in winter put additional strains on the energy system. He cited Stuttgart where experts found that if roof gardens had been increased by 15% to 20% there would have been a decrease in sewage pressure of 15%. Also in Germany, it was found that since WWII hard surfaces in the cities have quadrupled, significantly raising temperature levels and contributing mightily to pollution. Berlin and some other German cities are now *requiring* the greening of new building roofs with a 1% to 10% slope.

Contradictory as it sounds, agriculture and wilderness are also an essential part of the new city. Not only do they contribute to ecological balance, there are solid social and economic reasons as well. Much as the separation of work and community has created numerous urban costs and tensions, the separation of food growing and its consumption has been expensive and counter-productive. Both separations were rooted in cheap fuel, which we can no longer expect. Ideally, a city should be surrounded by a beltway of agricultural land rather than a beltway of concrete. While this is no longer possible in many older urban areas, what agricultural land exists should be rigorously preserved. Smaller and newer cities should plan for where their city's food will come from as carefully as where their residents will work. Farmer's markets, with their lower transportation costs, reduced packaging and fresher food, need to be regarded as essential rather than merely quaint. The demand is clearly there, as can be seen every afternoon at an organic farm north of San Francisco, where Federal Express trucks line up to receive produce packages to be delivered to New York City restaurants the next day. More thought to the interrelationship between city and farm might lessen the need for such extraordinary measures to obtain the basic substances of human existence, which, after all, are required even in citadels of commerce and culture.

Getting there is half the problem

I once asked a transportation consultant to name the single most efficient mode of mass transit. His reply: "Stop people from moving around so much."

Nothing we can do with mass transit can match the effect of lessening the need for people to travel. One study, for example, has found that doubling the population density of a city reduces annual auto mileage per capita by 25-30 percent.

On the other hand, high tech mass transit projects can have deceptive results. When I suggested two decades ago that Washington's new Metro system would *increase* street traffic, the notion was typically considered bizarre. Sixty-odd miles later, it is indisputable fact.

The reasons for this seeming contradiction include the basic fact that a subway, unlike streetcars or buses, does not compete for space with automobiles. Further, subways encourage new development, but only a minority of commuters to that new development use the subway. Hence, almost inexorably, the subway makes matters worse.

Fortunately, the experience of San Francisco and Washington, as well as the mind-boggling capital expense of heavy rail,has taken the bloom off the subway fad. More and more cities are renewing interest in streetcars or "light rail." A subway encourages "nodes" of development, often a considerable distance apart. The economics of subway development are such that true neighborhood facilities are shunned in favor of regional or upscale attractions. Thus one ends up with an numerous miniature downtowns but no place to get your laundry done. The trolley, on the other hand, disperses development, costs less for proximity to its route and physically takes space from the automobile.

Even the humble bus could be a much more effective part of the typical city's mass transit mix. Exclusive bus lanes can be easily created on major arteries, especially if they are counter-flow lanes in which the bus lanes run in the opposite direction of the automobile traffic. Cars tend to treat such counterflow lanes with considerable respect. Buses could be made more efficient by giving them priority (through use of school bus-type flashing stop lights) pulling in and out of bus stops. Buses could have zappers to control signal lights. And buses could have exterior bike racks to encourage multi-modal use. With reasonable effort, urban bus transportation could become as least as good as it is at your average airport or theme park.

The bicycle is the another greatly unused form of transit in this country. According to V. Setty Pendakur, a professor at the University of British Columbia, China in 1985 had about 300 million bikes and 1.2 million cars. In the US there were 103 million bikes but 139 million cars. The average occupancy of a bike in India is greater than the average occupancy of a car on the Bay Bridge. Yet here we still regard the bike as a recreational vehicle.

In fact, the bike is an extremely efficient way to move people around. Through any given amount of space, you can move about twice as many people per hour by bike as you can by car, and more than 50% as many as by bus.

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Yet not only do we not recognize the bicycle in urban planning, we're discouraging it here and abroad. Pendakur reports that this country is giving China $10 billion in aid for car-related projects in Shanghai. Yet only 2 percent of all trips in that city are made by car; 43% are by bike. Under the plan, bikes will be taken off main roads to give more room for cars. Further, 83% of the World Bank's urban transportation lending is for car-oriented projects. Pendakur has a different vision:

We can reduce, cut and curtail the land allocated to the car. We can make car owners/users pay the full cost of their vehicles, including direct roadway and parking costs, environmental costs, traffic control costs and policing costs. We can also encourage passive and positive modes of transport, both walking and cycling. We can redesign cities for new modes of transport. We can stop sprawl and bring the suburbs into the city. We can support public transport. Most of all we can boost the bike. As long as we think in terms of paying the full cost of the mode of transport used, the bicycle will come out on top.

The Magliozzi solution

One of the true delights of radio is NPR's Car Talk show, featuring the world's zaniest auto repairers, Tom and Ray Magliozzi. In an interview with the Green Letter, Ray proposed a universal 35 mph speed limit:

"There's all kinds of evidence about why it's the right speed. Horses run at 35 miles an hour. That means that God knew how fast we should go. The only animal on which a guy can ride and go somewhere is a horse, and the fastest moving one goes 35 miles an hour. . .Camels only run about 20 miles an hour, and then you wish you weren't on it.

". . .I mean, the only reason that people go 150, 200 miles away is because they think they can make it in three hours. If you knew it was gonna take you seven hours to do it, you wouldn't go. You'd stay home. You'd buy a fax machine and that would be it.

". . .The whole problem is everyone is moving around too much. Why is everyone traveling around? Why does everyone think it's better to be somewhere else? You know why? Because where they are sucks. It's just as simple as that. You know why it sucks? Because people are speeding around at 70 miles an hour."

At the EcoCity conference, another speaker, AC Transit planning manager Ron Kilcoyne, laid down four new principles of traffic engineering:

- Change the orientation from moving vehicles to moving people.
- Change from viewing transit as a social service to a viable alternative to the auto. "If transit isn't good enough for those who drive, then it isn't good enough for transit dependents."
- Change from a radial to a multi-destination orientation and from a peak to an all-hours orientation. "About 75 percent of trips are non-work, yet transit is largely oriented towards work trips."
- Introduce pricing schemes increasing transit revenues and the cost of driving. Automobiles are subsidized to the tune of about $300 billion a year. Tolls and parking fees should be increased and "a pollution tax should be introduced so that people are charged a tax based on the number of miles driven."

New places

A recent two-page ad for the Kentlands development in the *Washingtonian* was headlined: *What ultimately came off Henry Ford's assembly line were new neighborhoods.*" After a brief history of the car's impact on the nation, the ad goes on: "More cars meant more traffic so neighborhood streets were widened even further. Sidewalks were quickly replaced by turning lanes. Evening strolls became a lethal game of dodge ball. *** The breakup of the close-knit neighborhood began accelerating. Soon houses were built further from streets and thus, further from neighbors. Big porches where friends exchanged gossip were abandoned for back decks that provide solitude from the constant rush of traffic. The result, unfortunately, was a form of self-imposed solitary confinement. Neighbors drifted further and further apart. Ironically, the invention that was supposed to make everything more accessible had quite an opposite effect. Barber shops, grocery stores, even schools and churches were being built further away from the people who used them. *** We believe it's time to put on the brakes."

The Kentlands development hired town planners Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plate-Zyberk to accomplish a 352 acre design in Gaithersburg, Md. As Duany told *US News & World Report*, the suburb "assumes that the woman will always be there to play chauffeur." Their plan is based instead on the traditional grid system with narrow streets. Schools, shopping, parks and recreational facilities will be within walking distance.

Among other innovations Kentlands will provide retirement units alongside single-family homes and townhouses, and rental apartments above stores.

Another neotraditional community conceived by the same planners has already met considerable success. Seaside, a Florida resort, has about 150 clapboard houses bunched close to community facilities, all arranged along narrow streets. *US News & World Report* says, "In an area where home prices have flattened or dropped for much of the past decade, sales of Seaside's simple, tin-roofed homes have skyrocketed." The architects, incidentally, have created a model Traditional Neighborhood Development Ordinance that lays out in chart form simple guidelines for site and building design.[3]

While the impetus for what is being called "neotraditional" planning is coming from private developers, a few communities have caught on to the trend. In vastly over-vehicled northern Virginia, the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors have approved experimental zoning that would allow developers to create hamlets -- small villages with houses clustered in the center surrounded by open space.

Among the revolutions in thinking that has occurred among those in the forefront of the new city movement is a respect for density. Challenging the stereotype that density produces diminished quality, two Austrian scientists pointed out to the EcoCity Conference that per-capita energy use in a low density city is twice that in a high density city. They gave some reasons: "In high density cities, heat can be shared across the walls of different housing units, reducing the energy use for heating. When distances are short, bicycles can be used instead of cars, and a high density area can more easily maintain adequate ridership for public transportation, using up to three to five times less energy

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than single-person autos. With shorter distances for distribution, pipelines for sewage, gas, water, etc. can be shorter and energy needed for pumping is reduced."

Denmark has taken the idea much further, creating whole ecovillages, described by Floyd Stein, a Danish architect, as "more of an idea than a place." Some of these intentional communities have been laid in a spiral form, giving a design that is both compact and dynamic. But whether the product of hip capitalism or ecological visionaries, these new villages challenge many of the assumptions of the city and suburbia. Paolo Soleiri, the architect and philosopher, says, "Suburbia, epitomizing dispersion, consumption, waste, pollution, isolation, and parochialism" is "fundamentally the nemesis of the urban effort."

One doesn't even have to create a whole new village to start building the ecocity. It can happen in the most rundown neighborhood (a lesson learned with the vestpocket park movement in the 60s and then forgotten) or in the most bland suburb. Architect Peter Calthorpe, for example, has come up with the idea of "pedestrian pockets," which he describes like this:

A balanced, mixed-use area within 1/4 mile walking radius of a light rail station. The uses within this zone would include housing, offices, retail, daycare, recreation and open space. Up to 2000 units of housing and one million square feet of office can be located within three blocks of the light rail ration using typical condominium densities and four-story office configurations.

Would, Calthorpe asks, "the pedestrian pocket satisfy the family in search of their dream house in the suburbs?" He answers by pointing out that of 17 million new families formed in the 80s only 27% were of married couples with or without children. "Certainly the traditional three-bedroom single family residence is relevant to a decreasing segment of the population."

The suburban shopping mall can also be transformed, as happened at Mashpee Commons on Cape Cod. The parking lot at the end of this mall has been turned into a semicircular plaza with columns and arches, part of a plan to convert the shopping center into a town with pedestrian streets reminiscent of old Nantucket.

Even the fast food franchise can adapt to a new concept of urban living. It is already happening outside of cities. Allison Engel of Pacific News Service reported recently that as fast food restaurants reach saturation in urban areas and increasingly push into smaller and smaller communities, they are adapting to the traditions of small town America. She found in Princeton, IL, for example, that about 30 residents gathered at the local Taco Bell every Wednesday for bingo. About a mile away, the Hardee's hosts a free story hour on Monday afternoons for children ages five and under. And in Conway, SC, the Western Steer steakhouse is the meeting place for, among others, the Rotary Club, Full Gospel Businessmen; United Way; and the Coastal Carolina Quilters Association, whose members spend most of their monthly meeting day at their quilting frames in a separate dining room. On Sundays after church, everybody in Conway comes down, says head waitress Janet Boatwright. "People are getting up and down to talk to other tables, and we can barely figure out where to take the food."

Taking it back

The new city could be a new community, an ecological community based on cooperation before profit, liberty before sterile order, and justice before efficiency. The point is not to get pretty cities or cities that will salve the conscience of Sierra Club members resident therein. Human ecology also includes economic survival, it includes justice, it includes a decent education, it includes security, it includes happiness and it includes place. As Shakespeare said, "The people are the city." It is well past time for us to seize it back.

--Sam Smith

[1] *The First Ecological City Conference* Report. Wide variety of presentations made at this important conference. Also an excellent list of further resource material. $6.95 from Urban Ecology, PO Box 10144, Berkeley, CA 94709.

[2] *For more on zoning, see the Review, April 1988*

[3] *Copies are available from Duany & Plater-Zyberk architects, 2949 Coconut Ave, Coconut Grove, Fla 33133*

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